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ABSTRACT

The reading improvement program developed at Westminster College (Fulton, Missouri) was designed with a whole language base, one that considered reading, writing, speaking, and listening as inseparable components of language. Specifically, it was designed to meet the needs of 27 freshman students who were determined to be academically capable but who, because of low test scores or poor academic achievement, were considered marginal in terms of predicted college success. Most of the students appeared to be "pseudoreaders," that is, in spite of their apparent fluency in oral reading, they suffered problems in comprehension. Students participated in group instruction three hours each week and met weekly with the reading instructor either in small groups or individually. Miscue analysis and evaluative information derived from semistructured procedures based on textbook material were used for reading evaluation. Instruction centered around whole language activities that were combined with effective study techniques. Writing was a major emphasis, as were note taking, essay writing, preparing for and taking exams, and time management. Guest speakers discussed topics ranging from language strategies necessary for the content courses to relaxation techniques and test anxiety. Other strategies designed for language included previewing reading material, vocabulary building, inference/extension of meaning, selected deletion, peer critique, written reactions to editorials, and sustained silent reading. After the first semester, 70% of the students were found to be successful in performing college work. (HOD)

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Strategies for Language Expansion:

A College Reading Program

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One large, diverse area in the field of reading which offers a significant challenge to the reading profession is found at the post-secondary level. College reading improvement programs fall into this rather fragmented category. While reading programs have been initiated in various forms at a great many colleges and universities, they are often isolated entities, set apart from the college's regular curriculum. Because they are designed to meet specific needs of different schools, they may be set apart from each other. Though the needs, objectives and facilities differ among the various programs, the purpose remains the same: to bridge the gap between the reality of today's students as language users and the expectations for language use demanded by their colleges. The prevalent view seems to be that students who can't handle the required reading and writing shouldn't be in college. This view should be confronted with data which show that college students can and do learn effective reading and writing strategies necessary for college success.

The task for the reading professional appears to be that of destroying old images of the "problem readers" by offering new insights into the process of reading for both the students and their instructors. How then can we, as facilitators, develop a reading program based on these insights - one designed to narrow the gap between reality and expectation at the college level?

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Professionals and students in the field of reading have been exposed to the literature related to psycholinguistic theory and research for some time. This literature has provided the practitioner with expanding insights into the reading process and it has led to new discoveries with important implications for the applied areas. The need for the practitioner to possess a deeper understanding of both language acquisition and reading comprehension has become apparent. Psycholinguistic examinations of reading and of the processes involved in learning to read have emphasized the notion that reading is a 'natural' process. Research data based on miscue analysis of the performance of readers of all ages (Goodman & Burke, 1973; Watson, et. al., 1979) have shown us the strategies that efficient readers utilize and, thus, have helped create a new direction for reading instruction.

When we were asked to develop a reading improvement program at Westminster College, it seemed an opportunity to apply these notions in developing both evaluative techniques and instructional strategies. The following then, was our attempt to design and implement a college reading program with a whole language base, one that considered reading, writing, speaking and listening as inseparable components of language.

I. Program Philosophy

A reading program at the college level should reflect the philosophy of both the facility and the administration. Westminster College is a small private school with a selective enrollment policy. The reading program at the college was designed to meet the objective needs of a specific group of 27 freshmen students screened by the college admissions committee, who appeared to be academically capable but, who because of low test scores or poor academic achievement, were considered marginal in terms of predicted college success. The program was designed to be flexible and subject to

evaluation as the needs of the students changed. Student self discipline, motivation and a positive self concept were primary considerations of the program.

The reading program attempted to incorporate the findings of current research concerning reading efficiency. Since the students involved in the program appeared to need an emphasis on both receptive and expressive language, it made sense to construct a whole language program based on the strategies of efficient language users. Since the instruction was a new approach to reading for the students, it was necessary to help them gain new insights into the reading process as the program evolved.

II. Program Structure and Objectives

The reading-study skills program is the core of a developmental learning program initiated in the Fall of 1979. Basic courses in English and intermediate algebra, as well as reading-study skills, are available through this program which is based in the college counseling center. All students involved in the developmental learning program are required to participate in the reading section; however, enrollment in the other two courses is determined by individual need. Counseling is provided on a weekly basis for all students enrolled in the program. The counselors serve as academic advisors for the students. The program is offered in the Fall semester.

General objectives for the reading program are based on individual and group needs as determined by student evaluative profiles. Insights into the reading process, language expansion, content area language strategies and improved study skills are the main objectives of this program. The students participate in general group instruction three hours per week. Small group or individual meetings with the reading instructor are held weekly. A

specifically designed curriculum of a select core of freshman courses allows for a close working relationship between the reading instructor, content professors and the college counselors. The course is designed for two hours of academic credit and attendance is required.

III. Reading Evaluation

Individual profiles were developed from a number of sources. Previous standardized test information, such as SAT, ACT, and Nelson-Denny scores, was available but was not used for the purpose of reading evaluation. Standardized test scores were felt to be a limited value in determining whether or not a student had the background experience to comprehend his college texts. Evaluative information was derived from semi-structured procedures based on textbook material currently in use on our campus. Miscue analysis was routinely employed.

These data were felt to be more reliable for both analysis and correction of reading difficulties than those provided by standardized tests because of the close relationship between the student's purpose in reading and the reading strategies demanded by his college texts.

Students met individually with the instructor for the initial screening process, and were audio-taped as they read orally from an introductory psychology text while the reading instructor noted miscues (deviations from print) on the typescript. The students retold the information from the text, first as a free response, and then as a cued response with questions asked by the instructor. Silent reading with a retelling in writing was also used in the evaluation. The scoring procedures for both the oral and silent retelling were adapted from a format proposed by Goodman and Burke (1972). A maximum of forty points was given to answers which encompassed factual material.

Generalizations or major concepts based on the material in the text were given a maximum of thirty points. The Burke Interview (Burke, 1978), adapted for college readers, and questionnaires abstracted from psycholinguistic theory (Smith, 1979) and designed for the program probed the students' background experience and attitudes toward reading.

This information set the tone for discussion between the student and the instructor regarding the reading process, and strategies used by efficient readers.

Analyses of the evaluative data showed many areas of commonality among the students concerning reading activity, attitudes, habits and needs. Analyses of the taped text reading revealed that all of the students appeared to be fluent readers with relatively few miscues. Most of these students had difficulty in both oral and written text recall. They appeared to be "pseudo-readers," that is, in spite of apparent fluency in oral reading, comprehension was a significant problem. The Burke Reading Interview revealed that all of the students were from a "print rich" background. They reported a family member or close friend as being a good reader. When asked what makes the person a good reader, the standard reply was that they "read a lot." Asked what they do when they come to unfamiliar words in print, most of the group said they would pronounce it out, go back over it or look it up in the dictionary. Only six of the twenty seven students mentioned the possibility of skipping unknown words. The students all wished to be better in comprehension and reading rate. Other areas of expressed need were writing, vocabulary development and effective study techniques.

Information obtained from specifically designed questionnaires revealed that learning phonics, skills and rules were an important part of the students' early instruction. Perfect reading was emphasized, with accuracy the

apparent focus rather than meaning. All but five students felt that learning to read was meaningful and enjoyable; however, few expressed a positive attitude toward reading after that initial experience. In general, the group read little other than required reading and all of the data showed negative attitudes, even anxiety toward reading. The students stated that even in silent reading they felt as though they were reading out loud.

An item on one of the program questionnaires divided the class in two nearly equal parts. The question asked was, "Have you ever been told that you have a reading problem?" An item on another questionnaire asks if the student thinks of himself as a good reader. The students who had never been told they had a reading problem saw themselves as good to average readers. The data were reversed for the "problem readers," who saw themselves as poor to average readers.

IV. Instructional Strategies

With the evaluative data collected and analyzed, it became possible to develop strategies for both group and individual sessions. Overhead transparencies were designed to present and discuss insights into the language process. These strategies helped the students understand that language must be meaningful; that reading is making sense of print. Sounding out unknown words rarely gives clues to meaning and reading rate often improves with increased comprehension. The notion of "problem readers" was countered with the premise that we are all problem readers when confronted by print to which we bring limited experience. If concepts in text are unclear, the reader should search out additional sources of information in order for the print to make sense. The initial focus, therefore, was to lessen what appeared to be disinterest or even axiety toward reading by allowing the students to gain new insights as language users. Students must know that

efficient readers skip words, guess and make analogies, that background experience determines readability of their texts, and that comprehension is the basis of learning. The first and most apparent need was to have the students 'get into print.' Content area and recreational reading materials were used for this purpose.

Every language strategy developed for instructional purposes was designed to be multifaceted, and was based on the general course objectives. Whole language activities were combined with effective study techniques, since, as noted initially, the students' study behaviors, attitudes and skills needed to change in order for them to be successful in their college courses. Writing was a major emphasis in both class and individual sessions, Instruction and continuous reinforcement in note-taking, essay writing, preparing for and taking exams, as well as such areas as time control were emphasized in this course. Guest professors discussed topics ranging from language strategies necessary for their content courses, to relaxation techniques and test anxiety.

A whole language lesson which implemented predicting and confirming strategies was developed for the program, and was a preface to the application of these strategies to college texts. Exposure to a wide variety of titles of magazines and subject area journal articles added to the value of this lesson.

This strategy lesson, in our program, was called "Predictable Titles." It was designed to help the language user who fails to make and confirm predictions based on semantic cues and, therefore, fails to comprehend.

The outline for this lesson is as follows:

Procedure

1. Predictable titles from a variety of sources are chosen in order to help students use their intuitive knowledge of the semantic system of their language in order to arrive at meaning.
2. Student is shown the title and asked to tell what will be included in the related discourse.
3. Instructor lists student's predictions.
4. Student is asked to name the possible sources of the extrapolated titles. (Instructor may give student a number of possible sources.)
5. Student is given the corresponding article and asked to read the first few paragraphs.
6. Student is asked to support suppositions based on the reading.
7. Predicting and confirming procedures may be used several times throughout the reading, depending on length of the article.

Variations

Group activities

1. After modeling the procedure described above, students are divided into groups.
2. Each student receives a title and prediction paper.
3. Students list title predictions on paper.
4. Titles are rotated with each student writing a prediction for each title.
5. After rotation, students discuss their predictions for each title, and the student holding the title adds the group input to his list of predictions.
6. Corresponding articles are given to group for matching with titles. Each student receives one article and one title with group predictions to match with the author's text.
7. Student's guess the possible source of the article from a list of possibilities.
8. Students read their respective article.
9. Discussion of intuitive knowledge, readers background experience, surface and deep structure in language, author's meaning, individual's understanding with possible changes resulting from group input.

Other strategies designed for language included previewing reading material, vocabulary building, self-monitoring techniques, inference/extension of meaning, selected deletion (using a modified cloze procedure) reading-reacting-writing with peer critique, regular written reactions to newspaper editorials, and an adaptation of sustained silent reading.

VI. Program Evaluation

The final and most important factor in evaluation of this type of program is whether these students can be successful in their college courses. It is

early, at this time, to make such judgements; yet, encouraging data have begun to unfold. As previously noted, there was enough traditional preenrollment information on the students to make initial predictions as to the possibility of college success.

Students in the program were initially ranked, on the basis of available data. This ranking was then filed until the end of the course. Few predictions were accurate and, for the most part, it appeared that for these students, prediction based on previous achievement and standardized test scores were meaningless. Many students who initially were given little chance at college success were doing quite well at the end of the first semester. Six students in the original group of twenty-seven were advised not to return to the college after the first semester. Of those that did return nineteen or 70% were considered successful with a mean grade point average of 2.23. This compared favorably with the overall freshman average of 2.22.

The apparent success of the program thus far is probably due to several factors. The program was designed for a specific school. It was small, highly structured and flexible. There was no stigma regarding student involvement. Student motivation increased significantly and study habits improved. Individual tutoring, monitoring and counseling seemed to have a positive effect on student achievement. New insights into the language process, as well as instructional strategies for language expansion appeared to offer the needed foundation upon which a college curriculum could be built. Peer pressure at a school where learning is valued could also have been a positive factor.

VII. Conclusion

There appears to be a need for an increase in language proficiency, study techniques and individual counseling for a large number of college

freshmen today. For whatever reason, there are students who seem to need a structured program, and are able to respond to it in a positive manner. Faculty resistance to programs of this nature is, in part, due to the fear of lowering academic standards on college campuses by the admission of what might be considered marginal students. There is a need for longitudinal studies which consider the effect of such programs on these "high risk" college students. Perhaps if the findings are positive the "bone-head" and "remedial" images will dissolve. Even though the "good old days" are unlikely to reappear on college campuses, it now seems quite possible to significantly narrow the gap between college expectation and student academic reality by offering an initial intervention program. College academic standards need not and should not be lowered.